

THOMAS M. STEPHENS

JACK W. BIRCH

Merits of Special Class, Resource, and Itinerant Plans for Teaching Partially Seeing Children

Abstract: A review of pertinent literature concerning advantages and disadvantages of three organizational schemes for the education of partially seeing children is presented. Advocates of each plan have given arguments and pronouncements but little research evidence in support of their favored arrangement. Findings of recent studies are compared with the stated advantages for each pattern.

THIS review is concerned with organizational accommodations used in the special education of partially seeing children. It first deals briefly with the history of fulltime special classes, the resource teacher approach, and the itinerant teacher approach as organizational patterns. Opinions about organizational patterns and their purposes and relative effectiveness are then summarized. Finally, research evidence is presented on the contributions of various organizational patterns to attaining the educational objectives for partially seeing children.

Partially seeing children are defined as visually handicapped children who use ink print as a major mode of instruction. They are children who have visual acuity between approximately 20/70 and 20/200 after optimum correction or who have other visual disabilities and, in the opinion of a vision specialist, can benefit from special instruction.

THOMAS M. STEPHENS is Associate Professor and Coordinator of Programs for the Emotionally Disturbed, and JACK W. BIRCH is Professor, Program of Special Education and Rehabilitation, School of Education, University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Organizational Schemes

Three distinct day school organizational plans used for the special education of partially seeing students (Jones, 1963) are:

1. The fulltime special class in which all academic instruction is with a special teacher in a classroom containing only visually limited children.
2. The resource teacher plan in which partially seeing students are enrolled in a regular classroom and obtain most of their instruction within the regular class; the students go to the resource teacher in the special room for instruction and to use special materials as determined by individual requirements.
3. The itinerant teacher plan in which a specialist in teaching partially seeing children travels from school to school in order to provide parttime individual instruction to students and to offer consultant services to regular classroom teachers who have partially seeing students in their classes.

Provisions for partially seeing children in public schools in the United States began in 1913 when day classes for such children were started in Boston and, later that same year, in

Cleveland. The class in Boston was housed in a special building separate from normal children. In Cleveland, a cooperative plan was devised whereby partially seeing children engaged in activities requiring special materials and techniques in the special class but participated with normally seeing students in activities not requiring close visual work (Hathaway, 1953).

As educators developed programs for partially seeing youth, some used the Boston special day school plan as a model and others emulated Cleveland's cooperative scheme. No evidence has been found, however, to link those historical events with theoretical positions or educational research findings to that era.

Educators have devised many procedures, through the years, to provide for intellectual, academic, and physical differences of students. While present innovations in organizational modifications for instruction are made primarily to facilitate learning, Goodlad (1960) has noted that other purposes also are served. These include financial considerations, administrative ease, and teacher satisfaction. The present authors would add the influence of individuals who have strong views and who are in leadership positions as another factor to consider when attempting to account for the organizational patterns which have developed in the education of partially seeing children and youth.

Opinions—Itinerant and Resource Plans

A survey of the literature concerned with administration of special education for the visually handicapped reinforced Dunn's (1963) conclusion that there appear to be no studies concerned with the advantages or disadvantages of one plan of organization or concerned with comparisons among plans up to the time of his publication. Only one seems to have been made since 1963 (Stephens, 1966) and it will be referred to later in this review.

However, without a basis in specific research, many arguments have been offered in support of itinerant teacher plans and resource teacher approaches in preference to special classes. Jones (1963) cited five of what

he stated are the most frequently reported advantages:

1. *Similarities.* Emphasis is placed on the child's abilities and likeness to other children rather than on his differences.
2. *Resources.* The wealth of resources within the regular school program is made available to these children by including them in most general school activities.
3. *Multihandicaps.* The services of specially prepared teachers may be made available more easily to visually handicapped children who have additional major handicaps, and to both blind and partially seeing children when they are not kept together in the special class during the entire school day. The mentally retarded child who is also visually handicapped, for instance, can be enrolled in a special class for mentally retarded children, but still be served by resource or itinerant teachers specially prepared to instruct visually handicapped children.
4. *Individualized.* Under these plans teachers of the visually handicapped devote full-time to individualized instruction of children. . . .
5. *Social.* The visually handicapped child is educated in a setting more nearly approximating that which he will encounter in adult life [pp. 35-36].

The advantages of itinerant and resource plans reviewed by Jones are presumably less likely to be available to partially seeing children in fulltime special classes. Clearly, these arguments imply that the itinerant and resource plans permit more flexibility than does the special class plan.

Ashcroft (1963) believed that the itinerant plan was often characterized by sound educational practices. He described the direct services to students performed by the teachers as tutorial and remedial in nature. Usually, the direct services take the form of assistance to students in the use of equipment and special materials and in counseling services. Itinerant plans seemed more desirable to him at the secondary level after the students had had instruction in programs similar to resource teacher plans where more services are available.

Ashcroft reasoned that as partially seeing students become more proficient in basic skills they can function effectively with less comprehensive help. The earliest statement of that line of reasoning the present authors found was presented 27 years ago by Pintner (1942). He found what appeared to be a decline in median IQ scores between the ages of 10 and 12 years in students in "sight conservation" (fulltime day) classes. The 1937 Revised Stanford-Binet was used; the total group included 602 partially seeing children. A median IQ score of 97 was found for the 10 year olds in his sample. The 12 year olds had a median IQ score of 90. Pintner attributed this difference to a belief that the more intelligent partially seeing subjects were returned to regular classes between the ages of 10 and 12. Unfortunately he did not report a test of the significance of the difference between the median IQ scores for the two age groups. When the present authors applied a chi square test to his data, the difference in median IQ scores between the two age groups was not significant at the .01 level of confidence. Thus if a criterion of the rigor of the .01 level of confidence is used, there is no ground for considering the observed difference a real one, since chance factors could have contributed to the difference in median IQ's.

Morin (1960) credited an itinerant plan with two noninstructional advantages: (a) reduced transportation costs because the students were able to attend their neighborhood schools, and (b) the itinerant teacher being able to serve more visually limited children. No evidence was reported as to the effectiveness of this plan in relation to academic achievements.

Sibert (1960) described an itinerant teacher program in which the students were seen individually by the teacher for one hour a week. Consultant services were provided by the itinerant teacher to regular classroom teachers regarding proper seating, lighting, and use of special materials and equipment. No data concerning the effectiveness of the program were reported.

The Chicago Public Schools use a resource room placement for children with severe vision impairments who need an intensive pro-

gram of special teaching. Placement in an itinerant program is made for visually handicapped children with impaired vision at the lower limits of the range for special education services (Powers, Schall, & Welsch, 1965). Again, no evidence was presented to support the differential use of facilities.

Bertram (1958) stated that the itinerant plan can accommodate children from a wide range of ability levels, while the resource plan tends to require intellectual functioning within the average range. But she provided no evidence to support her contention.

Taken together, the arguments presented favor both itinerant and resource approaches, with nothing said in support of the special class. Differential use of organizational patterns is recommended by many, with the implication that a school system should include both the itinerant and resource plans. They should be accessible to all children so that those who would profit more from one or the other may be so placed. It is important to note that the above summary statements are neither supported nor refuted by research.

Research Evidence

Bertram's (1958) claim implies that the itinerant plan allows for more flexibility of instruction than the resource teacher plan. If she is correct, the mean score on intelligence measures for pupils in itinerant plans should be less than for pupils in resource plans, since more partially seeing children of lower intelligence would be found in itinerant plans. Also, the span of pupil intelligence found in itinerant programs, as indicated by such measures as range and standard deviation, should be greater than those found in resource plans. However, a comparison study (Stephens, 1966) of 768 subjects in itinerant and resource plans yielded the reverse, a significant difference in mean IQ scores ($p < .01$) in favor of the itinerant group; the same study showed no significant difference between standard deviations of the IQ scores for the two groups.

Opinions have been expressed to support the belief that partially seeing children who are served by itinerant teachers may have acquired higher levels of academic skills than those provided for through the other plans,

with the result that the itinerant teacher needs to have less contact with the students (Ashcroft, 1963). Those who are unable to keep pace academically with only the brief, infrequent contacts with an itinerant teacher would, presumably, be taught by a resource teacher or placed in a special class. If Ashcroft's observations are correct, students in itinerant plans should demonstrate higher academic achievement than those partially seeing children in special classes or resource plans. That position does have some research support. Stephens (1966) found a significant difference when mean scores on the Metropolitan Achievement Test were compared among the three organizational plans, with subjects in itinerant plans having a higher mean score than the children in the other two plans.

Jones and Collins (1965) found that only 16 percent of the programs in a national survey use the fulltime special class plan. But it should not be assumed that only 16 percent of partially seeing children are in fulltime classes. In a recent study of national scope Birch, Tisdall, Peabody, & Sterrett (1966) found that most partially seeing children in the elementary grades are in fulltime special classes. Apparently the districts which enroll large numbers of partially seeing students also tend to use many fulltime special classes. Special class plans do continue to be used. One can surmise that financial considerations may determine when a special class plan will not be used, since it requires a group of partially seeing children in the same building in order to justify the assignment of a teacher.

Another possible reason for the continued use of special classes for partially seeing students may be that regular teachers are reluctant to have these children in their classrooms (Murphy, 1960). When this reluctance exists, isolating these children from regular classes would probably serve to perpetuate unwillingness on the part of regular teachers to receive partially seeing students in their classes.

Historically, there seems to be no theoretical or research based rationale which has guided the development of resource, itinerant, or special class programs. The available opinions are sometimes consistent and sometimes incon-

sistent with the limited research information available. All things considered, the literature is inconclusive as to the contributions various organizational plans make to the school achievement of partially seeing children.

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